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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
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RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 5116
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2866
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2731
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 3360
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RHMFIISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAAIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L ASHGABAT 000514

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN, DRL

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TAGS: PGOV BAID SOCI TX

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN CAN BE A TOUGH ENVIRONMENT FOR
INTERNATIONAL NGOS

Classified By: Charge Richard Miles, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Visiting Eurasia Foundation of Central Asia representatives recently met with UNICEF's acting Representative, Abdul Alim, to discuss the prospects for an international NGO seeking to initiate a program in Turkmenistan. Alim said the first step is to assess government interest in the proposed program. The government lays out the parameters before an international organization is invited to operate in Turkmenistan. Regardless of whether the local partner(s) would be from the private or public sector, projects would still need to be vetted through the Foreign Ministry. In UNICEF's own experience, it elected to forgo working with the corporate sector in order to not jeopardize its other cooperation. The organization has only two corporate partners, Turkmenistan Airlines and Turkmentelecom, with whom they deliver public service messages via inflight information and SMS messages.

¶2. (C) Speaking more broadly, Alim remarked that he had not seen a great deal of change in how the government operates in the post-Niyazov era, although he said it was "certainly more open." The penitentiary and penal codes and the justice system all need to be changed in order to make the system more "child-friendly." Alim pointed out that for Turkmen officials, there are "safe" and "unsafe" options, and that they always opt for the "safe." The Turkmen Government focus is on preserving stability and security -- "everything is seen as it relates to stability."

¶3. (C) In Turkmenistan, all international organizations work with the Foreign Ministry. In this way, the country's overall geopolitical strategy is factored into the work of these organizations. Alim cited UNICEF's experience in other countries, where UNICEF might deal directly with ministries of health, education, or social welfare, in contrast to the Turkmen practice of the Foreign Ministry handling all UN agencies. He suggested that such an approach gives the working relationship "a different spin." Therefore, for example, the UNICEF representative will be invited to attend the reception of a visiting head of state, completely unrelated to its programmatic responsibilities.

¶4. (C) Alim mentioned UNICEF's successful immunization and

salt iodization programs, both of which are now fully implemented by the Ministry of Health. Its new areas of focus are addressing child mortality and implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Alim thought the Turkmen Government is "keen on legislative reform," but then takes implementation slowly in order to make sure that nothing threatening is involved. In the sphere of education, he cited the substitution of the Ruhnama with some of the current President's writings and the continuation of a largely Soviet curriculum as examples of a failure to implement reform. While the government is good at building infrastructure such as schools, what happens inside is not moving ahead. Alim said UNICEF has tried hard on that front, but has not seen any progress.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: If there was any doubt, the UNICEF chief painted a clear picture of the controlled way in which the Turkmen Government engages with international organizations. Requiring the Foreign Ministry to serve as the government's interface injects policy considerations into projects that, if handled exclusively by subject matter specialists, could well make significant strides unhindered by excessive bureaucracy. Perhaps that is the value of the Foreign Ministry's intermediary role in the minds of Turkmen leaders.

END COMMENT.

MILES